Peer-Reviewed Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Volume 1, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 4-24
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jtse.v1i2.4818
ojed.org/jtse

"Minding My Business": Understanding Black HBCU Undergraduate Women's Responses to Online Harassment Scenarios

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ABSTRACT

While research exists exploring college students' witnessing and reporting online harassment experiences, this work has primarily been situated at predominantly white institutions among majority-white college students, thus limiting our understanding of the role of race. Particularly, little is known about the experiences of Black college women. This mixed methods study integrated survey and focus group data of 29 Black undergraduate women enrolled at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). This paper answers the question, How do Black HBCU undergraduate women respond to instances of witnessing online harassment? Findings reveal that these women would contact friends and family, but expressed concern about engaging with authorities (e.g., law enforcement/university administration), police/authority violence, or re-traumatization. We conceptualize this study using a racial trauma framework. Findings can inform higher education professionals to consider how Black Women view online harassment, intervene, and prefer support.

Keywords: Historically Black College and University, Black women, online harassment, racial trauma

Today's college students are more digitally connected than generations prior (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Vogels, 2019). While significant research explores the benefits and affordances of college students' heightened connectivity (e.g., Brown, 2016; Emerick, 2019), our work explores the shadow side - online harassment and

cyberstalking. As students connect online more frequently, the chances of experiencing negative interactions increase. The rise of college students witnessing negative online interactions has become so common (Byrne, 2020; Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021) that college women view online victimization as unavoidable (Chadha et al., 2020).

Existing literature explores the prevalence of online harassment among college students their perceptions of the experiences and bystander intervention initiatives. However, it fails to consider how online harassment is nested within our social and cultural systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., sexism and racism) and its impact on individuals with marginalized identities, particularly Black women (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021). When navigating harassment, victims predominantly rely on support from their peers and other social support systems which are largely segregated and reflective of their own identity (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Gahagan et al., 2016). In particular, Black and Latinx women experience more negative online interactions than their majority-identity peers (Francisco & Felmlee, 2021). Therefore, Black women are more likely to be targets of online harassment based on their race and gender, and considering their social circle is largely Black women who are also experiencing these same high rates of victimization, they may be a hyper-targeted subpopulation of online victims (Vogels, 2021).

In this study, we examine how Black women reported navigating negative online incidents, particularly women who attend an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) with a majority Black student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Considering that much of the existing research exploring online harassment and bystander intervention is situated at predominantly white universities with majority-white study samples (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2022), we contextualize this study at an HBCU to expand our ability to understand the distinct experiences of Black women. Because past studies found that over half of Black participants reported that their race was a cause of their online harassment victimization compared to less than a quarter of the white participants (Vogels, 2021), our study sample of Black women is novel.

The present study uses a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell, 2021), to answer the question, "*How do Black HBCU undergraduate women report responding to instances of online harassment and cyberstalking*?" The purpose of this study is to explore how Black HBCU undergraduate women have responded to witnessing online harassment in the past compared to how they would respond in hypothetical situations. Our study explores the types of intervention behaviors Black women report they would employ while witnessing online harassment among their peers and who would they involve for assistance, if anyone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our work builds upon the existing literature on online harassment amongst college students, particularly among students witnessing their peers being harassed online. In this section, we review the literature on these witnessing experiences and bystander interventions. We conclude by reviewing the online experiences of our population of interest: Black HBCU undergraduate women.

Online Harassment

Over 70% of U.S. adults report using Internet platforms and social media sites. As a result, high engagement in these spaces has increased exposure to online harassment incidents (Vogels, 2021). Online harassment is defined as the deliberate and ongoing abuse "of a person with less perceived power" via the internet or text messaging (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015, p.73). Like face-to-face bullying, central to online harassment is the power inequity that exists between the offender and the victim. Venet (2021) posed that as a result of the social hierarchy of dominance, oppressed groups (e.g., women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, persons with disabilities) disproportionately become targets of online harassment thus making online harassment seemingly inescapable for today's college women.

Online users, a demographic primarily made up of college-aged students (e.g., 18-to-29-year old's), report that witnessing at least one type of online harassment is fairly common (Vogels, 2021). Scholars have categorized four types of online harassment: *Mean Statements & Rumors* (e.g., gossip), *Image Appropriation* (e.g., unauthorized images/videos), *Threats and Intimidation*, and *Cyberstalking* (e.g., web-based monitoring) (Byrne, 2021; Hayes, 2019). In a prior study, we found that 64% of a sample of undergraduates from a large predominantly white institution (PWI) had witnessed at least one type of online harassment since starting college (Byrne and Hollingsworth, 2021). Of those who witnessed some form of online harassment since starting college, the majority (52.2%) reported witnessing *Mean Statements and Rumors* while fewer students (21.7%) reported witnessing *Cyberstalking* (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021).The majority of these students reported that in response to witnessing online harassment they "adjust[ed] their privacy settings on their accounts (50.5%) and [chose] not to post online (44.8%)" (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021, p.23) rather than intervene in the situation as a bystander. In other words, students employ strategies to safeguard themselves from being targeted by online offenders.

Bystander Intervention

As online harassment increases, researchers continue to examine bystanders' willingness to intervene. Despite most online users having witnessed online harassment (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021), fewer than half (34%) reported intervening (Duggan, 2017). Therefore, previous studies (Banyard et al., 2005; Gahagan et al., 2016) have explored the factors that either prevent or encourage online users to intervene.

Bystanders are more likely to intervene if they are sympathetic to the victim and understand the impact of experiencing online harassment (Doane et al., 2014). However, for bystanders to feel compelled to intervene, they must first be able to recognize the online behavior as problematic or harmful (Banyard et al., 2005). The likelihood of a bystander being sympathetic to the experiences of victim is heightened if they themselves have been victims of online harassment (Banyard et al., 2005; Latané & Darley, 1970). Similarly, bystanders are more likely to intervene if they have a pre-existing relationship with the victim. (Hayes, 2019). Despite the

importance of bystanders feeling a moral inclination that predicts intervention, many do not out of fear of becoming targets themselves (Byrne, 2020). As a result, scholars have sought to understand the types of intervention responses or behaviors, if any, students employ as witnesses to online harassment.

Bystanders play a meaningful role in preventing or reducing negative online interactions (Banyard et al., 2005). Doane et al. (2019) found that there are "three types of bystander intervention behaviors that occur: helping the victim, joining the bully (i.e., reinforcing the online bullying), or doing nothing" (p.1). Considering these intervention behaviors, Duggan (2017) found that online users who reported witnessing online harassment, responded by helping the victim by directly replying to the offender or reporting the offender's profile, post, or comment to the social media platform. In a separate study on bystander intervention, Hayes (2019) found that some students reported helping the victim by "reach[ing] out to someone for help such as a campus Resident Assistant (RA), counselors…or call 911" (p. 476). However, not all online users elected to intervene as bystanders.

On the contrary, in past instances of witnessing online harassment students reported that they did not disclose or ask for assistance from any figure of authority specifically naming student affairs professionals despite their role as front-line support staff in higher education (Byrne, 2020; Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021; Schuh et al., 2017). The passivity of these negative intervention responses (i.e., joining in with the offender or doing nothing) is influenced by the anonymity of online platforms and the presence of multiple bystanders. Students believe that online offenders are non-identifiable, and another bystander will intervene thereby mitigating their responsibility (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2014). Building upon the existing literature, this study explores how race and gender inform the bystander intervention strategies of our study sample: Black HBCU undergraduate women.

Trauma

The way we navigate the world is largely influenced by the compilation of our identities (e.g., race, gender, age, class), our experiences, and our worldviews. Of importance to this study is the impact of trauma on how we perceive and respond to the world, particularly in an online environment. Trauma is described as exposure to a one-time or series of events that causes deeply distressing feelings (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). While trauma can happen to anyone, Black Americans are disproportionately exposed to or affected by racial and historical trauma (Hernandez & Harris, 2022).

Racial trauma is defined as "events of danger or threats of harm related to real or perceived racial discrimination (i.e., racism) experienced by People of Color" (Comas-Diaz & Hall, 2019, p. 1). Indeed, Black Americans continue to "experience lifelong and intergenerational racism that is persistent and systemic" (Hernandez & Harris, 2022, p.96) that undoubtedly leads to racial trauma and influences their emotional, psychological, and physiological responses. The most prominent example of intergenerational racial trauma, or historical trauma, is chattel slavery (Comas-Diaz & Hall, 2019).

While slavery was abolished over 150 years ago in the United States and today's Black college students did not directly experience it, they are possibly the descendants of a person who has endured such trauma. Examples of modern-day secondary trauma (i.e., witnessing a traumatic event of a friend, family member, or someone with a shared identity) among the Black community include "...publicized videos detailing modern-day lynching and biased policing of Black individuals like the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery shared on social media" (Maxie-Moreman & Tynes, 2022, p.1). These examples of "direct or indirect racial terror through widely shared violence and racist speech disproportionately lead to race-related trauma" (Maxie-Moreman & Tynes, 2022, p. 2). The prevalence of such images and the uncensored broadcasting of violence against Black people, make online environments emotionally unsafe spaces for Black Americans (Carter, 2007; Comas-Diaz & Hall, 2019). Centuries of slavery and the ongoing exposure to violent media against Black bodies is passed down and lives within the mind and body of generations to come. As a result of historical and racialized trauma, Black Americans adopt protective strategies (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022).

Though many protective strategies exist, one relevant to this study is loyalty to the Black community in the form of collectivism and silence to outsiders (Jones, 2014). The Black community has for many years adopted a "village" or collectivist mentality which means they have developed a heightened sense of communal loyalty and "look out" for one another with the belief that no one else will (Shelby, 2002). This sense of communal loyalty is reinforced by a common African proverb: "What goes on in my house stays in my house" or in other words, the business of the Black community is only the business of the Black community (i.e., silence to outsiders)(Jones, 2014, p.10). Particularly, as a consequence of the historical subjection to involuntary bondage, the Black community may carry a distrust for white people and figures of authority resulting in silence (Shelby, 2002). Considering that many Black Americans carry this mentality, secondary trauma has psychological effects on this community (Hernandez & Harris, 2022).

We use online racial trauma - which is chronic online exposure to negative race-based behaviors that elicit psychological responses - to understand the response strategies that the participants in this study (Black women) report employing while witnessing online harassment. We also use intersectionality as a conceptual lens to apply a both/and analysis rather than either/or approach to understand the importance and influence of the Black woman identity. Particularly, a both/and analysis expand our ability to consider Black women's experiences from a multidimensional viewpoint situated within two systems of oppression: racism (i.e., Black) and sexism (i.e., woman) (Crenshaw, 1991). The study participants, as Black women, have, to some degree, experienced or witnessed gendered and racialized online harassment. Therefore, we situate the participants' identity as Black HBCU undergraduate women critical in shaping their hypothetical responses to the online harassment and cyberstalking scenarios in this study in which we use online trauma as a framework to understand their responses.

METHODS

The present study integrated survey and focus group data of Black undergraduate women enrolled at a public HBCU in the Mid-Atlantic United States. The purpose of this IRB-approved study was to explore how these women *have responded* and *would respond* to online harassment scenarios considering their cultural and social contexts. By collecting data on prior experiences and hypothetical scenarios, we hoped to overcome instances of social desirability bias (i.e., when students inflate the extent to which their behaviors are prosocial or heroic; Miller, 2011). We used a convergent mixed methods design (Figure 1) in which the quantitative data was used to determine how Black HBCU undergraduate women have responded to past instances of online harassment while the qualitative data was used to explore how a subsample of these participants would respond to hypothetical scenarios of online harassment (Creswell, 2021; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The two streams of data were analyzed separately, and the findings were integrated to answer the questions, *How do Black HBCU undergraduate women report responding to instances of online harassment and cyberstalking? To what extent do the focus group findings confirm the survey results?* We recognize that exploring online bystander intervention from both hypothetical and retrospective approaches strengthen our understanding of the possible difference between what participants say they would do versus what they have done in the past.

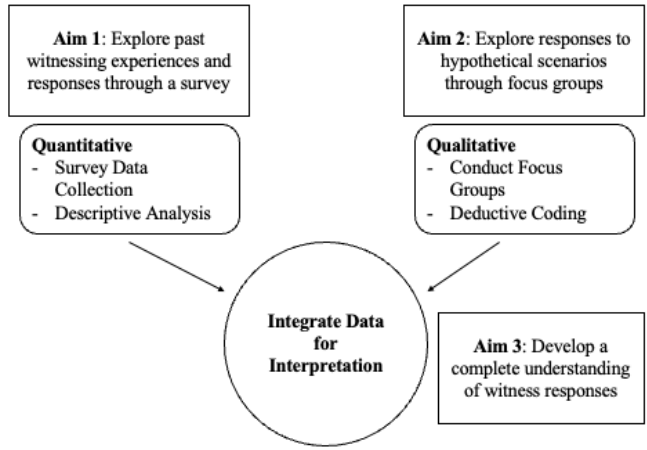

Figure 1: Convergent Mixed Methods Design

Data Collection

In April 2021, we collected two types of data for this study: an online survey and focus groups.

Survey

We invited undergraduate HBCU students to complete an online survey that consisted of Likert-scale, check-all, and open-ended questions regarding their demographic information, and experiences with witnessing online harassment. Using a previously designed instrument (Byrne & Hollingsworth, 2021), participants were asked to identify the types of online harassment they had witnessed since enrolling in college on a 5-point scale from one (Never) - five (Many Times) Participants who reported - witnessing at least one type of online harassment were presented with a list of people (i.e., family, friends, police, student affairs professionals) and asked to check all of the people who they reported the online harassment incident (see Table 2).

Focus Groups

Students who fully completed the survey were invited to participate in a one-hour Zoom-based focus group. During these semi-structured focus groups, participants were presented with three scenarios created by Hayes (2019). The scenarios depicted the four types of online harassment highlighted in the literature review. In the scenarios, the participant's hypothetical man friend made comments on social media about his ex-girlfriend (Hayes, 2019). In scenario one, the friend posts *Mean Statements* about his ex-girlfriend on social media. In scenario two, the friend makes social media posts about his ex-girlfriend that aligns with the definition of *Cyberstalking*. In scenario three, the friend makes physical *Threats and Intimidation* towards his ex-girlfriend on social media (Hayes, 2019). According to Hayes (2019), "the severity of the abuse was escalated across the three scenarios to determine whether intervention behaviors differ depending on the severity of abuse an individual is exposed to…" (p. 464).

Participants were then asked questions about their willingness to intervene in the three scenarios Our questions included, *How would you respond in this scenario? Would you tell anyone? If so, who? Would you report this? If so, how?* We kept these questions open-ended and did not offer a list of common interventions to not bias their responses. Focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Students that completed the focus group were compensated $15.

Participants

Data presented in this paper represent a subsample of a larger study of 46 college students. Our quantitative analysis focuses only on the 29 Black women who completed the survey instrument. These 29 Black women were invited to participate in a focus group - of which 10 participated. Among the students in our quantitative sample and qualitative subsample, all identified as Black women who were enrolled as undergraduates at the HBCU in Education, Community Health, and Liberal Arts Programs. Participants represented all four class ranks. All participants were assigned a pseudonym which will be used throughout this paper.

Data Analysis

To answer our research questions, we analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data separately. For our quantitative analysis, we conducted descriptive analyses and chi-square tests of association using SPSS 25. For our qualitative analysis, we double-coded the focus group transcripts using a codebook based on Hayes (2019) 10 intervention behaviors and Banyard et al.'s (2005) Intentions to Intervene scale. Using Dedoose we coded the transcripts when a participant mentioned that they would do one of the following 10 intervention behaviors: talk to the friend/offender, talk to the ex-girlfriend/victim, offer support to the friend/offender, offer support to the ex-girlfriend/victim, comment on the social networking website, call for assistance, suggest or recommend programming, report the behavior, call 911, or do nothing. We met to discuss our coding, clarified the codebook, and rectified any differences. After analyzing both types of data separately we compared the quantitative and qualitative findings to answer our mixed methods research question.

FINDINGS

We first present the survey results of the 29 Black HBCU undergraduate women. Then we present the focus group findings according to Hayes' (2019) scenarios. Finally, we compare the data and present our integrated findings.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive analyses reveal that 27 of the 29 participants had witnessed one or more types of online harassment since enrolling in college. The most common witnessing type was someone being called offensive names and efforts to purposefully embarrass someone. Fewer, however, had witnessed someone being cyberstalked or sexually harassed online since starting college.

Table 1: Online Harassment Witnessing Experience Since College (n=29)

	Frequency				
Variable	**Never (1)**	**Once (2)**	**A Few Times (3)**	**Several Times (4)**	**Many Times (5)**
Offensive Names	2	3	10	5	9
Threats	10	4	5	6	4
Sustained Harassed	10	4	9	3	3
Cyberstalking	13	4	7	5	0
Efforts to Purposefully Embarrass Someone	7	1	10	7	4
Online Sexual Harassment	16	1	6	3	3

The 27 participants who reported that they had witnessed some type of online harassment since starting college were then asked who they told, if anyone, about the experience. As depicted in Table 2, participants more often told a friend or family member about the experience than an authority figure like a professor or police officer. Indeed, none of the participants said that they told a student affairs professional, which corresponds with findings from Byrne and Hollingsworth (2021).

Table 2: Who Witnesses Told about Witnessing Online Harassment (n=27)

Person or Role	Yes	No
Student Affairs professional	0	27
Police/Law enforcement	2	25
Faculty	2	25
Supervisor/Work colleague	2	25
Website reporting system	4	23
Social media followers	6	21
Parent/Family member	8	19
Friend	18	9

Note. Two participants were excluded in the total responses since they did not witness online harassment since starting college.

To determine if this difference in responses was significant, we ran a series of chi-square tests of association for each type of witnessing We compared the responses of participants who had witnessed cyberstalking (n=16) to those who had not (n=13) and found that there was a statistically significant difference in the decision to tell a friend ($X^2(1)=9.81$, $p=.002$). Across all of the types of witnessing experiences, there was a statistically significant difference in the decision to tell a friend if the participants had witnessed sustained online harassment, a physical threat, purposeful embarrassment, or sexual harassment. There was no significant difference in the other responses

Table 3: Frequency of the Types of Witnessing Experiences and Responses Since Starting College (n=29)

	Cyberstalking		Sustained Online Harassment		Offensive Names		Physically Threatened		Embarrassed		Sexual Harassment	
	Yes (n=16)	No (n=13)	Yes (n=19)	No (n=10)	Yes (n=27)	No (n=2)	Yes (n=19)	No (n=10)	Yes (n=22)	No (n=7)	Yes (n=13)	No (n=16)
Social media followers	4	2	4	2	6	0	5	1	5	1	4	2
Website Reporting system	3	1	3	1	4	0	3	1	3	1	2	2
Police/Law enforcement	1	1	1	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	1
Faculty	1	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	1
Supervisor/Work colleague	1	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	1
Student Affairs professional	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Parent/Family member	6	2	7	1	8	0	7	1	8	0	4	4
Friend	14	4*	16	2**	18	0	16	2**	17	1*	11	7*

*Note: Using chi-squared analyses, we compare the students' responses between if they had vs. had not witnessed that type of online harassment. *p<.05; **p<.001*

Qualitative Results

In this section, we present the three hypothetical scenarios created by Hayes (2019) and the participants responses.

Intervention Responses for Scenario 1

> *A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. He then calls his now ex-girlfriend derogatory names on social media. This happens once or twice and he makes no further posts about the ex-girlfriend (Hayes, 2019 p.479).*

Primarily, participants reported they would *talk to the friend/offender* in an effort to resolve the situation without involving others or they would *do nothing*. Indeed, participants posed solutions to resolve the situation such as encouraging their friend to delete the post. Folami stated,

> I would maybe call the person… or plead with the person to take the post down and try to remind that person of the consequences behind them doing what they are doing…I would basically just try my best as a friend and give my influence to stop that person.

Additionally, the participants mentioned the shame and embarrassment that the harassing post might bring to their friend as a reason they should delete the post. Fatima shared, "That is possibly not good to put their business out there on social media." Naomi agreed and said, "[I would tell them] you need to stop because you look goofy. You sound petty right now and really bitter." Overall, the most prominent response was to encourage the friend to delete the post based on the negative attention it may bring to themselves, the ex-girlfriend, and their association as a friend.

Not all participants would get involved, however. For example, Naomi shared, "'unless it got to the point of physical threats or something more serious, I would not report it. Maybe I am desensitized, but I see things like this all the time." Fatima also said, "When I first heard the scenario, I honestly would not do anything." Considering that a few of the participants described this type of online harassment (i.e., *Mean Statements)* as being petty or feeling "desensitized" signifies they believe the behavior of their friend it is not that important or alarming.

Intervention Responses for Scenario 2

> *A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. He makes these comments almost immediately after the breakup. These posts escalate in frequency and are ongoing for several months. He does not make threats to engage in violence but mostly sticks to calling his ex-girlfriend*

> *derogatory names. Occasionally, he writes about his former partner's location and daily activities (e.g., saw the ex at the dining hall) (Hayes, 2019 p.479).*

In scenario two, the intervention response participants were more likely to report is that they would *talk to the ex-girlfriend/victim and offer advice or support, call for assistance*, or *suggest an educational program or resource* to their friend. However, most of the participants noted that they would only offer their support or advice to the ex-girlfriend if she came to them first. For example, Raelynn shared "Maybe if the girl came to me for advice, I would tell her maybe you should get some help because it sounds kind of stalkerish." The participants recognized that this scenario was related to cyberstalking and were concerned about the safety of the ex-girlfriend.

> The first person I would want to get in contact with is the girlfriend…because he is posting her activities and her location…and I feel like that is something that she should know, just in case she has any type of enemies…because they could easily find her. (Wynter)

Participants also mentioned seeking out assistance by involving people they felt could help them in this situation such as their friend's family members. Diana said "...if I know their parents well or somebody that they [the friend] respect, I might speak to them…Someone who is a little bit older and maybe leave their name out so that I can get better insight." Folami also shared, "...probably like their sibling or someone that I know that can get to that person, other than me…" Additionally, Raelynn felt that involving mutual friends to "intervene together and engage our friends' minds somewhere else" could potentially deescalate the situation and prevent it from "going too far."

Although seven of the 10 participants stated that they would call for help, most participants could not clearly identify who that person would be. For example, Sheba commented, "I'm kind of confused on who I would reach out to. Would it be someone in the counseling office or a professional that handles issues similar to this?" Sheba also added,

> [I would] probably ask another adult for advice on what to do …and you do not want to get too many people involved.

Amber agreed that privacy in this situation was important stating she would tell her friend "I know you are upset but write it down in your own journal. Like, you do not have to post it on social media letting everybody know your personal business."

Two participants suggested an educational resource or program to their friend. For example, Folami said, "I would talk to them [the friend] and suggest they see the school counselor because it is clear that they have some unhealthy attachments, and they need to work through it before it gets worse." However, Raelynn disagreed and said,

> No, [I would not talk to anyone] I think that there should be a private conversation… unless they ask you to find them help, then I would look for

> resources to get them whatever kind of help that they need, but I don't know if I would decide to put my friend up [involve with outside support] on my own. I would keep it between the two of us.

Naomi agreed with Raelynn that she would limit involving authority figures to protect her friend from university sanctions.

> I would definitely report him to whatever platform is there and reach out to the ex-girlfriend and let her know to block him from all social media [platforms] because even if that is my friend, he has gone too far... because if I tell the school they might put him on probation or something like that, and that could ruin his whole future. I would rather him just be banned from having Facebook, because…you do not need Facebook, but you do somewhat need an education…and hopefully it ends there. (Naomi)

Sheba agreed with Naomi sharing that she did not want to get her friend in trouble by involving help or reporting him. But Sheba also expressed sympathy for the ex-girlfriend that if she did not report the man friend/offender, this could lead to further harm and harassment. Overall, the participants in our study responded to this scenario by stating they would reach out to the ex-girlfriend out of concern for her safety. They would also call for assistance from the friend's family members, mutual friends, or other figures of authority such as a Resident Assistant (RA) or campus counseling staff. But, they were unsure of who the right person would be and what consequences or reactions would follow once they did involve other individuals.

Intervention Responses for Scenario 3

> *A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. The posts begin with derogatory names for his ex-girlfriend and increase in severity. His most recent post includes threats to visit his ex-girlfriend's dorm at night and attack her. You read this post 30 min after your male friend posts the threat of violence(Hayes, 2019 p.479).*

In scenario three, the most prominent intervention responses were *report the behavior* and *call 911*. However, participants shared that their intervening response depended on the closeness of their relationship with the friend/offender. For example, Wynter shared, "If I am not close to him, I might just report it and get some of the other people to report it too. Because if it is wrong then Instagram has guidelines, and they will take it down." However, Ashley said, "I have to call my friend and see what's going on, see about mindset and see if there's any way, you know that he can come to my place instead of going to the ex-girlfriend's place so we can talk about this to deescalate the situation or stop him from messing his life up."

While some considered the depth of their relationship to the offender that would inform their intervention responses, the majority (eight of 10) elected to report the behavior to an authority figure such as an RA or the police based on the mention of a

physical threat. Eve stated, "...I would report to the authorities fast." Naomi agreed and said,

> If he is making physical threats to come to visit her and attack her, then I will definitely report that to the police, as well as that platform. And I would consider reporting it to the school. I would tell a dorm official like an RD [Resident Director].

Fatima explained her response and mentioned, "I do not live on campus…so I do not really know what resources are already on campus. That is why I was straightforward and just calling the police."

Although the majority of the participants felt that involving the police could help stop their friend from hurting his ex-girlfriend, they were reluctant to call the police on their friend because they assumed he was a Black man. For example, Raelynn stated, "I probably would try to not call the police as much as possible, just given the circumstances of today, you know, calling the police would really be my last resort because sometimes they are not really helpful." To which the Researcher clarified, "And I just want to clarify that you all have assumed that your friend has a shared minority identity that has a conflicting relationship with law enforcement. And is that why you would prefer to not call the police?" A few participants nodded, and Ashley responded, "Yes." Participants were considerate of the historical and racist history of the relationship between police and Black men (e.g., police brutality and fatal shootings of unarmed Black men), and this informed their decision to involve the police or not.

Intervention Responses Across Scenarios

To summarize the participants' intervention responses, we drew findings from across the three scenarios. We found that participants' decision to intervene related to the severity of the scenario. For example, Fatima mentioned that she would "do nothing" in scenarios one and two but would involve an authority figure in response to scenario three. Four of the 10 participants shared they would *do nothing* in scenarios one or two, but none said they would *do nothing* for scenario three.

In scenario one, the majority of the participants elected to encourage the friend to delete the post and any action other than that (i.e., involving 911) would be unnecessary as the post was seen as trivial. In scenario two, the participants were more likely to reach out to both the friend and the ex-girlfriend to talk to or offer support. Participants also shared they would report the behavior, call for assistance, or suggest an educational program or resource (e.g., the counseling center) for both the ex-girlfriend and the friend.

In scenario three, participants were more likely to involve law enforcement in comparison to the other two scenarios. Participants almost exclusively mentioned involving police in scenario three as a single response in comparison to the variation in responses in scenarios one and two. They were also likely to report the behavior to a trusted individual or someone in a helping position such as a RA or a parent. We

conclude that the more severe in abuse or presumed violence of the scenario, the more likely the participants were to reach out to an authority figure for help.

Mixed Methods Findings

The purpose of our mixed method study design was to explore how Black HBCU undergraduate women reported responding to instances of witnessing online harassment hypothetically and in past instances. To answer this question, we compared the focus group findings to the survey results. Our findings suggest that, in instances of witnessing online harassment, the type of harassment is related to participants' decision to intervene. For example, if the type of harassment were offensive names or *Mean Statements*, the participants said that they would not tell anyone both in the survey and in the focus group. However, when participants witnessed *Threats and Intimidation*, and *Cyberstalking*, most participants said that they would call someone for advice or help with intervening. The quantitative analysis determined that participants were significantly more likely to tell a friend or family member but no one else. The qualitative analysis revealed that participants would also tell the friend's family or mutual friends and in severe scenarios, the police. We also found that students were unlikely to report to university staff or faculty both in the past and in response to the hypothetical scenarios.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how a sample of Black HBCU undergraduate women reported responding to online harassment instances considering their gendered and racialized identities. Evident from both our qualitative and quantitative analyses is that participants are reluctant to report incidents of online harassment to authorities unless the situation might lead to physical harm. Instead, participants preferred to work with the offender and resolve the issue before involving others. When they did involve others, the most reported response in both the quantitative and qualitative samples was to tell a friend or family member.

Evident in our findings is the participants' consciousness of privacy and shame connected to harassment victimization. Participants emphasized the importance of having a private conversation with their friend rather than directly commenting on the post t. In the event that they did decide to involve outside help from friends, family, or campus affiliates, one participant (Diana) went as far as to use an alias for advice before offering the identity of their friend. The participants in this study were in agreement that they would not reach out to the ex-girlfriend unless she initiated contact. This potentially affirms that as witnesses, they sought to protect themselves from publicly affiliating with online harassment and the offender and desired to reduce the vulnerability to be victimized themselves - which aligns with findings from Byrne and Hollingsworth (2021). As a result of their mindfulness to maintain privacy and reduce embarrassment, the participants carefully calculated who, if anyone, they would involve for assistance. Considering this finding through a gendered and racialized paradigm and our earlier mention of the prevalence of silence to outsiders

in the Black community, it could be that maintaining privacy and secrecy is a culturally appropriate protective strategy (Jones, 2014).

While the participants sought to involve assistance, many expressed uncertainty of who, besides a friend or family member, would be the right person to call after witnessing online harassment. A few of the participants mentioned that maybe an RA or someone in the counseling center could help, but there was not a consensus. Fatima, who self-identified as non-residential (e.g., did not or has not lived on-campus), elected to exclusively call the police because she was unfamiliar with the role of an RA and other campus resources that could help in this situation. This finding suggests that perhaps participants elected to *do nothing* because it was unclear who to call for help. In addition, participants mentioned that they were unaware of the implications of telling the school about the online harassment which could suggest that students do not tell campus staff for fear of inappropriate sanctions to the offender especially considering the race of the offender. While racial bias in campus judicial systems is beyond the scope of this paper, Holmes and Anaya (2016) have explored this inequity.

Finally, the participants initial response to vignette three was to call the police but, upon reflection, they expressed hesitancy in part because of the long history of violence and division between Black people and the police. This is likely a result of both the secondary racial terror that Black women witness online and the long history of distrust for white people and figures of authority (Pickett et al., 2022). A few of the participants noted that they prefer not to be the cause of their friend receiving a criminal charge or being expelled from college which could be a result of the expected community loyalty prevalent in the Black community (Shelby, 2002). Particularly, reporting or relinquishing another Black person to a punishable system that has a history of biased outcomes based on race could be internally felt or publicly viewed by the Black community as an act of betrayal.

Overall, our mixed methods approach to studying witnessing responses revealed discrepancies between what participants said they would do in a hypothetical situation and what they did in the past. We found that participants were less likely to report online harassment incidents to authorities - even instances of *Threats and Cyberstalking* - in real life than they were in hypothetical situations. This could possibly be explained as a type of social desirability bias in which participants may exaggerate and overstate their bystander intervention responses.

Limitations

The findings from this study are limited by our small sample and study design decisions. The scenarios positioned the man/offender as a friend of the study participants. It is possible that if we reversed the roles and positioned the ex-girlfriend as the study participant's friend, they may have elected different intervention strategies. Additionally, if we removed the genders of the characters in the scenarios and allowed the participants to interpret their gender and sexual orientation, this could have impacted their responses. Our survey instrument did not offer the participants the option to separately identify their response type by harassment type. In future studies, we suggest altering the survey instrument to introduce the type of harassment

and then the reporting behavior types individually. Finally, we did not count the frequency of each time the focus group participants mentioned each of the 10 intervention behaviors because, as is a normal limitation of the conversational nature of focus groups, participants did not repeat solutions and ideas that had already been stated by their peers.

Implications

Our findings highlight the need for practitioners to consider the historical and racial trauma that marginalized populations experience and how it shapes their perceptions and responses to online harassment. Helping professionals should consider the long history of mistrust in both disciplinary systems and authority figures. While working with Black women, helping professionals should position themselves in a way to understand the cultural dynamics and respond in ways that reflect fairness, loyalty, safety, and autonomy to their personal and cultural values. Venet (2021) poses that to "decrease bullying (e.g., online harassment) is to create equitable and affirming [educational] environments (p. 29)" that prohibit hate and biased speech. Overall, implementation of policies and programs to address online harassment should be grounded in cultural competency and sensitivity to historical and racial trauma (Pope et al., 2019).

The findings from our study indicate the need for practitioners to better equip students with the necessary skills to intervene in instances of online harassment. We infer that participants were motivated to reach out for help for one of two reasons:(1) to transfer resolution responsibility to an authority figure or (2) collaborate with an authority figure to learn how to resolve the situation on their own. When participants reported the situation to an authority figure to transfer responsibility, we hypothesize that they wished to offload the burden onto someone they perceived to be an expert. These participants expressed concern for their personal safety, their lack of intervention knowledge and skills, and their disinterest in being involved with a threatening situation. In these cases, participants sought solace in the situation being resolved appropriately by the authority figure, and that they (the student) would no longer need to be involved.

Other participants, however, wished to report the situation to an authority figure, not to offload the situation, but to be coached on how to appropriately intervene. These participants wished to call a campus professional, friend, or family member who could help them gain intervention knowledge and skills, and provide feedback on how to safely resolve the situation. These participants wished to stay involved but needed support in making decisions and taking action.

In both cases, participants' decision to report the situation to an authority figure seemed to be informed by three internal questions: Do I have the skills to intervene safely and effectively? How involved do I want to be in this situation? Will this authority figure meet my needs? The last question highlights how participants were more likely to reach out to a particular authority figure when they were aware of how that person would likely react. For example, participants were likely to talk to an individual with whom they already had an established trusted relationship (e.g., an RA or RD) because they understood that they would likely coach them on how to

respond but take over if the situation became too dangerous. We pose that participants' decision to tell an authority figure is based on both their self-evaluation of their own intervention skills, their interest in being involved in the situation, and their understanding of how the authority figure will respond.

Future research could examine the bystander intervention perceptions and strategies comparing residential and non-residential students. Considering our precise sample demographics, future studies could explore the intervention responses of other racial minority populations and oppressed groups. Furthermore, examining the response strategies of law enforcement to instances of online threats and violence on college campuses, particularly among Black student communities could strengthen the existing literature. Lastly, though this study examined the intervention behaviors of intimate partner violence future studies could examine different types of online abuse such as targeted racial messages. Overall, this study highlights the need to further study the perceptions and response strategies of other marginalized subgroups.

CONCLUSION

This mixed methods study aimed to explore how a sample of Black HBCU undergraduate women reported responding to witnessing online harassment both hypothetically and in past instances. Our qualitative sample allowed us to understand participant intervention strategies through a gendered and racialized lens which is still nascent in the existing literature. Our integrated findings suggest that like other college students, Black women rely on their peers and family members for support but are uniquely aware race and gender of themselves, the offender, and the victim. Thus, the findings suggest that higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should consider how Black women view online harassment, engage in intervention, and prefer support by adopting culturally grounded practices.

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